

Refusing pathology: Black redaction in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*

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journals.sagepub.com/home/psc**David Ventura** 

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Abstract

The final chapter of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* includes several psychiatric case histories that speak to the indelible effects of the deathly atmospherics of colonialism on the psychology of the colonized. Though Fanon reveals that these case histories are drawn from his own clinical practice in Algeria, he almost entirely refuses to contextualize their inclusion in the text, and even warns that his presentation intentionally 'avoid[s] any semiological, nosological, or therapeutic discussion'. In this article, I read Fanon's case histories in *Wretched* in terms of Christina Sharpe's notion of Black redaction, which she adumbrates in her *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* as a critical strategy for 'imagining otherwise' that seeks to counter the generalized anti-Black atmosphere that still governs the world in the wake of transatlantic slavery. My argument is that in presenting the case histories of *Wretched* in refusal of dominant psychiatric discourses, Fanon engages a Black redactive strategy that aims to imagine the psychological effects of colonization *otherwise* than through the pathologizing colonial frames by which racialized and colonized lives are systematically rendered invisible. Further, I contend that reading Fanon's case histories in such Black redactive terms enables us to recognize that his clinically inflected political thought is not premised on a valuation of pathology, as has been argued by his Black optimist (Fred Moten) and Afro-pessimist (Jared Sexton) readers alike. In fact, as I conclude by arguing in response to these readings, at play in Fanon's Black redactive strategy in *Wretched* is not a valuation of pathology, but the matter of its transvaluation.

Keywords

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Black redaction, Christina Sharpe, refusal, pathology, colonial atmospherics, blackness, Black optimism, Afro-pessimism, decolonial psychiatry

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The final chapter of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, titled 'Colonial War and Mental Disorders', includes several psychiatric case histories that are drawn from Fanon's clinical practice in Algeria between the years of 1954 and 1959. Despite their relative prominence in Fanon's text, and the proliferation of scholarship on the relation between his decolonial psychiatry and politics, remarkably little commentary dedicated exclusively to these case histories has appeared in the secondary literature.¹ That, in all their poignancy, the case histories should have generated such scholarly silence can perhaps be explained by Fanon's own manner of presenting them in *Wretched*. In stark contrast to his other psychiatric writings, Fanon refuses to provide much therapeutic or theoretical context for his four series of cases, and even goes as far as warning that if readers find these largely uncontextualized 'notes on psychiatry untimely and singularly misplaced [*inopportunes et singulièrement déplacées*] in a book like this', then 'there is absolutely nothing we can do about that' (WE 181/239).² As Emma Kubu has noted in one of the few papers devoted exclusively to the topic, all this lends a rather strange air to this section of *Wretched*: 'Fanon's spare, clinical rhetoric in his notes on such cases virtually has nothing in common with the lyrical tones and lush transitions of the rest of the book. Silence, melancholia, and fragmentation prevail'.³

In this article, I seek to read the sparsity and fragmentation of Fanon's case histories in *Wretched* in terms of Christina Sharpe's concept of *Black redaction*. In her exceptional *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Sharpe presents Black redaction as a strategic practice that simultaneously 'interrogates established knowledges' and provides a means of 'imagining otherwise' (ITW 124).⁴ Staging two examples of this strategy in her own text, Sharpe conceives Black redaction as a *counter* to the violence that is ceaselessly and pervasively visited on Black lives in the wake of the historical disaster of transatlantic slavery. Simply put, Black redaction, for Sharpe, is a way of undoing the representative violence that is exercised on Black life in the afterlives of slavery; it is a way of attending to Black life that proceeds otherwise than through the anti-Black prisms through which that life has historically been silenced and made to disappear.

My wager is that reading Fanon's case histories with Sharpe – that is, *redactively* – does not simply enable us to get a better view of the textual politics of *Wretched*. Although Sharpe's concept permits us to get a clear sense of why Fanon might have 'avoided any semiological, nosological, or therapeutic discussion' (WE 183/241) in introducing his psychiatric notes, at stake in my reading is more than simply the matter of ascertaining how this textual decision contributes to what might be called the 'permanent struggle to counter the atmospheric death' of colonialism.⁵ More crucially, Sharpe's concept of Black redaction raises the question of how blackness is to be *refigured* in response to a generalized anti-Black atmosphere that has historically functioned by 'marking blackness as pathology' (ITW 44). To read the case histories in *Wretched* as examples of Black redaction is thus also to raise anew the relation that Fanon's work posits between blackness, anti-blackness, and pathology.

This relation, as it figures in Fanon's work, has been a focal point in the debate on whether blackness is to be read optimistically (Black optimism) or pessimistically (Afropessimism). Indeed, it is partly and precisely around the 'value' that Fanon presumably attributes to pathology that both Fred Moten and Jared Sexton – to cite only two influential

readings – come to formulate their respective views on the matter.⁶ Now, the fact that Fanon’s clinically inflected work should have assumed such exemplarity in this debate is not surprising. For if, at times, Fanon appears to affirm blackness *as* an affirmation of pathological being, at others, he seemingly counterpoises this with an insistence on the ‘attitude of flight’ and ‘refusal’ that racialized bodies can bring to bear against the social mechanism of pathology itself.⁷

One of this article’s central claims is that while *Wretched*’s case histories tell us much about the ‘value’ that Fanon’s thought presumably attributes to pathology, they by no means confirm either the Afro-pessimist or Black optimist positions on blackness and pathology. At play in Fanon’s case histories is neither an affirmation nor a negation of pathology, but the matter of its *refusal* and *transvaluation*.⁸ My suggestion, however, is that the transvaluative meaning of this refusal can be glimpsed only when Fanon’s case histories are read in their *Black redactive form*, that is, only when they are read in terms of the work that Fanon’s redactive presentation of mental disorders in *Wretched* performs to *imagine pathology otherwise*. Said differently, there is an *imaginary multivalence* that offers itself in Fanon’s case histories through their redactive form. Moreover, despite not being fully detected by either the Afro-pessimist or Black optimist readings of Fanon, this imaginary multivalence can nonetheless explain why his psychiatric writings should hold such illustrative power for both sides of this debate.

This article articulates this argument in three stages. I begin by providing a brief overview of Sharpe’s concept of Black redaction as it features in *In the Wake*. I then turn my attention to *Wretched*’s case histories in an attempt to illustrate their Black redactive form. Finally, I draw out the implications of my reading by placing it into dialogue with the Black optimist and Afro-pessimist readings of Fanon’s presumed avowal of pathology.

I Black redaction in the wake of transatlantic slavery

In the Wake seeks to explicate the main modalities by which Black existence continues to be constituted in the still-unfolding aftermaths of transatlantic slavery. Taking her cue from Saidiya Hartman, Sharpe insists that the history of slavery has not simply perpetuated the manifold forms of racialized precarity that still pervade ‘post’-emancipation societies today: ‘skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment’.⁹ More profoundly, or intimately, this history remains constitutive in defining Black existence as specifically *marked by* and *lived in* the wake of that historical disaster: ‘to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing presence of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding’ (ITW 13–14). On this reading, to live in the wake means not simply to be continually marked, in everyday Black existence, as a body who bears an essential relation to slavery, the slave ship, death, danger, terror, criminality, disease, pathology, and so on (15). Living in the wake also means to be ceaselessly buffeted by what Sharpe dubs *the weather*: ‘In my text, the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack’ (104). To live in the weather of the wake, in other words, is to experience one’s blackness and Black being as constituted by a continued vulnerability

not just to an endless series of isolated instances or events of anti-Black racism, but to the more generalized ensemble of anti-Black forces, structures, and environments that continue to prevent Black lives from living and breathing. Explicating this weather by means of Fanon's appeal to the colonized's inability to breathe, Sharpe holds that, in the wake, the normativity of Black exclusion and death is produced not by 'the specifics of any one event or sets of events that are endlessly repeatable and repeated, but the totality of the environments in which we struggle; the machines in which we live; what I am calling weather' (111).

Historically, Sharpe argues, this weather has produced a distinctive *orthography* whereby 'a set of quotidian catastrophic events and their reporting' are configured so as to make the produced normativity of Black death 'in/visible and not/visceral' (21). Among other instances, this orthography is legible in the proliferation of redactive representations of Black life that have been historically generated by the weather of anti-blackness: 'There is, in the Black diaspora (and I include the Continent here because of colonial histories and presents and trans*migration) a long history of Black life, of Black lives being annotated and redacted' (114). Finding salient examples in the blacked-out 'sensitive' information of state-sponsored documents, the endless ditto dittos of slave ship ledgers, and the absences of the archives, the primary function of these redactions has been to render Black and colonized lives *silent* and *invisible*, that is, to make such lives *disappear* both from the present actualities in which they unfold and from all possible futures from which they might be recalled, reinvoked, and remembered. As an expression of the wake's orthography, that is, redaction has typically been deployed in a way that 'registers and produces the conventions of antiblackness in the present and into the future' (21).

Beyond explicating these modalities by which Black death is immanently and imminently produced, Sharpe seeks to register 'the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially' (13). These various interruptions are condensed by Sharpe as *wake work*: as the praxis for continuing 'to imagine new ways to live in the wake of slavery....[as] a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives' (19). It is as a form of wake work, moreover, that Black redaction is announced – alongside Black annotation – as a strategy for 'imagining blackness and Black selves otherwise, in excess of the containment of the long and brutal history of the violent annotations [and redactions] of Black being' (115).¹⁰ Sharpe's suggestion in introducing Black redaction is that the redactive practice of blacking, editing, or revising out material in textual or visual representations of racialized lives need not *only* function as a mechanism for erasure and forgetting. When what is abstracted from and in those representations are the signifiers that continue to mark racialized lives as less than human and condemned to death, such redactive manoeuvres can provide a stimulus for *sensing and imagining those lives otherwise*. That is, by selectively (re)placing, (re)framing, and (re)configuring the content of extant (and indeed, as I note shortly, *emergent*) representations of Black and racialized lives, redaction can enable those representations to produce a 'signifying surplus' that – under the orthography of the wake – they were never 'meant' to express (ITW 80). Put another way, when redactive manoeuvres are deployed *in refusal* of the weather that continues to render 'Black and blackened' lives unlivable, they become *Black* redaction (34).¹¹ They become

a means of imagining, ‘reading and seeing something in excess of’ the orthography by which that unlivability is normatively produced (ITW 117).

In the Wake stages two examples that illustrate this imaginative work of refusal that Black redaction can perform to counter the weather of anti-blackness. The first draws on the series of daguerreotypes that were made by Joseph Zealy for the ethnologist Louis Agassiz in 1850, and that ‘would be used to support slavery and to naturalize and justify the continued subjection of black people in and eventually out of slavery’.¹² ‘In a move that is counter to the way photographic redaction usually works—where the eyes are covered and the rest of the face remains visible’, Sharpe redacts the original portraits such that *only* the eyes of two captured people, Delia and Drana, come into view (ITW 118). As Sharpe notes, the aim of this redactive practice is to produce an untimely disruption of the orthographical gaze and established knowledges that once froze Delia and Drana as objects of ‘scientific’ analysis: ‘I redact the images to focus past...the white people who claimed power over them and the instrument by which they are being further subjugated....I want to see *their* looks out and past and across time’ (118).¹³ That is, in refusing to repeat both the way traditional photographic redaction works and the endlessly re-circulated figure of the brutalized Black body, Black redaction here invites the imagination to ‘see and hear’ in Delia and Drana’s eyes a range of ‘anagrammatical’ significations whose distinguishing feature is that they disrupt and work in excess of ‘the dominant and persistent grammars of [racialized] unhumaning’.¹⁴

Sharpe’s second staging of Black redaction revolves around the story, featured in a *New York Times* article in 2014, of Mikia Hutchings, a young Black girl who was charged with a felony for graffitizing a school wall with a white friend. Sharpe notes that although the original article is sympathetic to Mikia, and even tries to bring her voice into focus, it nonetheless makes her *disappear* by including various other voices and discourses that remain inflected by the weather’s ongoing criminalization and disciplining of Black bodies. Countering this orthographic ascription, Sharpe redacts the article such that *only* Mikia’s words appear and that ‘we might hear what she has to say in her own defence in the midst of the ways she is made to appear only to be made to disappear’ (ITW 118–19). Once again, this redaction seeks above all to spur the imagination: it challenges those who come across this story to *sense* and *attend* to that which, in Mikia’s words, exceeds or signifies beyond the orthographic hold that the original reporting places her in. In other words, Black redaction here works to sound a note of *care*: to ‘perform care counter to what is offered and enforced by the state (many states, any state), which imagines and enacts care for the poor, the black..., the vulnerable as prison cell, grave, mental institution, [and] prison-school’.¹⁵

That Sharpe’s stagings of Black redaction reconfigure extant representations of Black life should not, however, be taken to mean that Black redaction can *only* perform its wake work on already existing archival material. As Sharpe writes: ‘I am interested in knowing how we imagine [the] past, in excess of the fictions of the archive, *but not only that*. I am interested, too, in the ways we recognize the many manifestations of that fiction and that excess, that past not yet past, *in the present*’ (ITW 13). Or, as is also suggested by the dictionary entries for redaction that Sharpe epigraphically deploys to introduce the concept, Black redaction registers a creative process, or action, that is not merely

subtractive (removing existing elements from view) or *reconfigurative* (rearranging those elements anew) in relation to the past and present realities that it works *on* and *with* (113). Black redaction also registers the way that such realities can be creatively and selectively *collected, imaged, and portrayed* so as to imaginatively evoke ‘what the archives don’t record’ (126). For Sharpe, this is precisely what is illustrated by Julie Dash’s film *Daughters of the Dust* (1992), which marks slavery’s temporality by means of an image that finds no strict evidentiary support in the archives, namely, the indigo blue stains that remain on the hands of some of its protagonists long after their deathly work on the Sea Islands’ indigo pits had ceased. According to Sharpe, ‘Dash was well aware that the indigo stains would no longer be visible forty years after the end of legal chattel slavery’ (ITW 126). Yet Dash selects to portray these stains.¹⁶ And with such ‘visual and aesthetic choices for marking slavery’s long time’, Sharpe argues, ‘Dash engages in some of her own Black redactions. By which I mean, *her redaction is her decision to show* the traces of slavery as the indigo blue that remains on the hands of formerly enslaved people’ (126; emphasis added). Though made in passing, this remark introduces the crucial point that Black redaction can, alongside its subtractive and reconfigurative functions, equally take shape as ‘the “art of making portraits” (image and text)...as refusals to accede to the optics, the disciplines, and the deathly demands of the antiblack worlds in which we live, work, and struggle’ (115).¹⁷ As wake work, that is, Black redaction can also refer to the way that realities are selectively constructed, documented, and narrated so as to register an imaginative excess to the atmospheric death that is ceaselessly visited on Black and racialized lives (cf. 59).

Undoubtedly, even in this excessive function, Black redaction does not entirely *evade* or *transcend* the violence that is ceaselessly produced by the wake’s orthography. Although Sharpe does not dwell on this point, her recurrent assertions that the weather ‘repeats and repeats and repeats in and into the present’ indicate that *even* instances of wake work will somehow be bound to this repetition (90). To quote Hartman, whose method of critical fabulation Sharpe draws upon, we might say that Black redaction’s refusal ‘does not operate outside the economy that it subjects to critique’; that *minimally, at least*, ‘it replicates the very order of violence that it writes against’ or refuses.¹⁸ As regards Sharpe’s own redactions, this necessary replication of violence is expressed in the way that the redacted portraits of Delia and Drana remain minimally reliant on Zealy’s original daguerreotypes and the attendant ‘violence of the law and the gaze’ that their framing betrays; and in the way that Mikia Hutchings’ words remain visually, if not structurally, enframed by the now blacked-out newspaper article that previously made her disappear.¹⁹ Put another way, the violence of the weather is so totalizing that it imposes a *hold* even on those practices and performances that seek to radically refuse its orthography. ‘The holds multiply’ in those refusals as their constitutive limit (ITW 73). Yet, for Sharpe, as for Hartman, this necessary limitation ‘rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates the desire for a liberated future’.²⁰ Because *also* expressed, ‘if only momentarily’, alongside and in excess of Black redaction’s minimal repetition of violence is ‘the Black anagrammatical and the failure of words and concepts to hold in and on Black flesh’ (ITW123). That is, even when Black redactive performances are minimally held by

the atmospheric orthography they refuse, they do so with an anagrammatical *difference* that crucially (re)figures ‘blackness anew, blackness as a/temporal, in and out of place and time putting pressure on meaning and that [orthography] against which meaning is made’ (76).

As such, Black redaction is characterized not by its *opposition* but by its *transversal refusal* of the weather of anti-blackness.²¹ Indeed, it bears recalling that Sharpe repeatedly describes Black redaction’s wake work not as oppositional but as *counter* to the weather of anti-blackness: ‘counter to the way photographic redaction usually works’, ‘counter to the force of the state’, ‘counter to abandonment’. Sounded in this repetition is the idea that Black redaction does not seek to ‘resolve’ or ‘correct’ the problem of Black death by producing ‘more humanizing’ representations that would diametrically oppose the weather’s orthography. At stake, instead, is the task ‘to think and imagine laterally, across a series of relations in the hold, in multiple Black everydays of the wake’ (ITW 113). Thus, Black redaction seeks less to dispel the weather’s violence and its orthography than to create an imaginative transversal movement which, despite remaining *in* and intersecting *with* those violences (and the attendant risk of replication this implies), nonetheless *cuts across* and *exceeds* them by producing anagrammatical significations that refuse ‘the very premises that have reduced the lived experience of blackness to pathology and irreconcilability in the logic of white supremacy’.²² In this sense, what Black redaction’s counter to the weather offers is an imaginative *encounter* with Black and blackened life that enacts the possibility of attending to that life in refusal of the orthography by which its death is normatively produced. Promised in Black redaction’s transversal countermovement, in short, is the potential for imaging and imagining Black and racialized lives ‘not with force, but with care’.²³

II Black redaction in *The Wretched of the Earth*

Having outlined Sharpe’s notion of Black redaction, I now want to read the case histories in Fanon’s *Wretched* as enacting another, nascent deployment of this strategy. As is well documented, Fanon moved from France to Algeria in December 1953 to take up a post as a psychiatrist at the Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital, located on the outskirts of Algiers.²⁴ Prior to his expulsion from Algeria in 1957, Fanon also carried out his own private practice and volunteered his services at the National Liberation Army’s medical facilities. This work provided the clinical setting for the ‘transmutation of values’ that Fanon’s practice sought to perform on the prevalent models of psychiatric care of his time.²⁵ It also provided the scene for the case histories included in *Wretched* which, I will argue, are themselves presented as a concretization of this task.

As they appear in the text, Fanon’s case histories are spread over two series (Series A and B), each of which collects several complex individual cases that range from, among other disorders, the random homicidal impulses displayed by an Algerian massacre survivor, to the murder by two young Algerians of their European playmate, the paranoid ‘terrorist’ delusions of a young Algerian, and the psychological effects of torture practices on their European perpetrators. In addition to these individual case histories, *Wretched* presents two further series that *group* patients whose ‘symptoms of morbidity corresponded to different methods of torture’ (Series C) and whose disorders can be

‘characterized as being psychosomatic’ (Series D) (WE 207/269, 216/279). While these latter two series also include testimony from individual patients, they differ in nature from the first two series in that they focus on aggregating symptoms rather than on selectively portraying the *singularity* of patients’ lived historical experience. As such, Series C and D are perhaps best read as *collective case studies* – and when, in what follows, I speak of Fanon’s case histories, I will be referring mainly to those cases in Series A and B that are devoted to respecting a patient’s history in its singularity.²⁶

One notable feature of these individual case histories is the fact that they are almost entirely devoid of any surrounding clinical or theoretical rhetoric. As such, the case histories in *Wretched* differ markedly from those in Fanon’s other psychiatric writings. Indeed, even those clinical cases that figure in *Black Skin, White Masks* – which is initially presented by Fanon as ‘a work on psychology’ that ‘break[s] with tradition’ and ‘leave[s] methods to the botanists and mathematicians’ – tend to be couched in extensive dialogue with psychiatric and psychoanalytic discourses (BSWM xvi/9). A case in point is the discussion, closing the chapter on ‘The Black Man and Psychopathology’, of a young woman whose neurosis is said to ‘demonstrate that at an extreme the myth of the black man, the idea of the black man, can cause genuine insanity’ (183/168). Though Fanon closes his account by stating that he does ‘not want to elaborate on the substructure of this psychoneurosis’, his presentation of this case is nevertheless prefaced by an extensive discussion (ranging almost fifty pages) of phobia-related neuroses as they figure in the works of Freud, Hesnard, Mannoni, and others (183/168). Similarly, the isolated case studies that Fanon wrote up as part of his clinical practice in Algeria and Tunisia are almost invariably engaged with prevailing psychiatric discourses.²⁷

By contrast, *Wretched* almost entirely refuses, or redacts, any such discussion in its presentation of the case histories. What is more, Fanon announces his case histories with the statement that this redactive manoeuvre is intentional. At the outset of ‘Colonial War and Mental Disorders’, he writes:

We have included here cases of Algerian and French patients under our care which we think particularly meaningful [*particulièrement parlants*]. We need hardly add that our approach here is not that of a scientific work, and we have avoided any semiological, nosological, or therapeutic discussion. The few technical terms used here are solely meant as points of reference. (WE 183/241)

Put another way, if the varied case histories included in *Wretched* are meaningful, their meaning derives not from what extant psychiatric discourses might have had to say about them, nor from the technical terms that such discourses might have used to classify the disorders of the patients in question. Signaled here, instead, is the suggestion that it is Fanon’s very redaction or refusal of conventional scientific, nosological, and therapeutic discussion that will enable his case histories to become significant, or *telling* (*parlants*). Undeniably, Fanon’s note that his unscientific presentation will still rely on technical terms as passing points of reference indicates that there will be some limits to this redactive gesture; that minimally, at least, that redaction will remain held by the violent order it refuses. Nevertheless, what Fanon announces here is that, *even as bound by this*

violent hold, his selective manner of documenting and portraying these case histories will still enable them to signify something untimely and misplaced (or anagrammatical) that cuts across and exceeds that violence (cf. WE 181/239).

Certainly, as if to further acknowledge that this refusal will not entirely transcend the economy of violence it refuses, Fanon quickly follows up these ‘methodological’ remarks with two clarificatory notes that *do* briefly address existing psychiatric discourses. One of these notes concerns the ‘well-established notion’ in clinical psychiatry that the psychotic reactions presented by patients like Fanon’s are ‘relatively benign’ (184/242). Fanon’s response to this assumption is terse and concise: ‘We believe on the contrary that the pathological processes tend as a rule to be frequently malignant’ (184/242). The second annotation Fanon provides in anticipation of his case histories concerns the trigger for the psychological reactions evinced by his patients. ‘As a general rule’, he writes, ‘clinical psychiatry classifies the various disorders presented by our patients under the heading of “psychotic reaction.” In so doing, priority is given to the event that triggered the disorder’ (183/241). Now, Fanon’s response to the latter assumption is crucial less because of what it says *to* existing psychiatric discourses, than what it says *of* the environment that he considers as having been the principal trigger for his patients’ disorders. In striking parallel to Sharpe’s stress on the weather and its displacement of the significance of isolated events of violence, Fanon writes that what unites his case histories, and particularly those in Series B, ‘is principally the bloody, pitiless atmosphere, the generalization of inhuman practices, of people’s lasting impression that they are witnessing a veritable apocalypse’ (183/241).²⁸ In foregrounding this atmospheric dimension to his case histories, Fanon is therefore not simply seeking to *refute* or *oppose* the assumptions of the prevalent clinical discourses of the time. More broadly, he is seeking to thematize the weather *from* which his patients’ disorders have emerged and *to* which his idiosyncratic portrayal of their case histories seeks to issue a refusal or *counter*.²⁹

Given the weight he places on the deathly atmospherics of colonialism, Fanon’s decision to refuse the hegemonic psychiatric discourses of his time should not surprise. For as the early pages of *Wretched* argue, the colonial world ‘is not content with physically limiting the space of the colonized, that is, with the help of [its] agents of law and order. As if to illustrate the totalitarian nature of colonial expansion, the colonist turns [*fait*] the colonized into a kind of quintessence of evil’ (6/44). Colonial psychiatric discourse was undoubtedly one means by which this continuous fabrication of colonized subjectivity as evil was effectuated. In the years surrounding Fanon’s psychiatric practice in Algeria, the tradition known as the Algiers School functioned as a central cog in this orthographic mechanism of racialized subjectivation. Established and led by Antoine Porot, this tradition held that the diverse mental disorders expressed by North African patients, which included their presumably inherent criminal tendencies and primitivism, could be accounted for in terms of certain cerebral defects. Such racist psychiatric evaluations, moreover, were often deployed as the explicit orthography for justifying the colonial state of affairs, as is evinced by Porot’s claim that the ‘colonizer’s reluctance to entrust the native with any kind of responsibility does not stem from racism or paternalism but quite simply from a scientific assessment of the colonized’s limited biological possibilities’.³⁰

Fanon's objections to the Algiers School's racist presuppositions are well known, and they even feature in the final chapter of *Wretched*, namely, in its closing stand-alone section titled 'From the North African's Criminal Impulsiveness to the War of National Liberation'.³¹ Yet, crucially, the case histories presented by Fanon earlier in the chapter do not make a reappearance in this concluding section. In their distinctive avoidance of nearly all semiological, nosological, or therapeutic discussion, neither are the case histories deployed in order to simply refute or oppose the racist orthography of psychiatrists such as Porot. To be sure, there are moments where this orthography betrays itself as exercising a hold *even* on Fanon's avoidance of it, as is exemplified by the title he gives to Case 2 of Series A ('Random homicidal impulses in a survivor of a massacre'), which minimally, at least, evokes the Algiers School's theses on the 'criminal impulsiveness' of North Africans, even as the case history itself entirely avoids their discussion (WE 190/248). Nevertheless, in avoiding that discussion, Fanon's redacted presentation still performs a refusal of the *greater* interpellation with racist discourse that would be implied by any effort to deploy the case histories as 'scientific' objects that demonstrate opposite or contrary 'findings' to those espoused by the Algiers School. Indeed, in bracketing any dialogue between the orthography of colonial psychiatry and his own patients' histories, Fanon can be taken as inviting his readers to sense in the latter anagrammatical significations that exceed and disrupt the former's meanings and the social mechanisms through which that meaning is made.

Perhaps more surprising is Fanon's refusal to present his case histories in dialogue with the more radical – though still largely Eurocentric – psychiatric discourses of institutional psychotherapy. As is well known, the work of institutional psychotherapists such as François Tosquelles was pivotal to Fanon's own psychiatric practice in Algeria, which indeed deployed – albeit in radically modified form – the methods of 'social therapy' that Fanon had absorbed during his residency at the Saint-Alban Psychiatric Hospital between the years of 1952 and 1953.³² Once again, though, no substantive discussion of this alternative psychiatric approach is featured in Fanon's case histories. Even in announcing his case histories, the only significant appeal that Fanon makes to institutional psychotherapy arrives through his assertion that the colonial occupation in Algeria is 'the triggering situation [*l'événement déclenchant*]' for the disorders presented by his patients (WE 183-4/242) – a claim that clearly echoes Tosquelles's view that occupation was not just a 'physical condition' but a situation that also created specific 'states of mind'.³³ Yet, as if to distance, or redact, his own case histories from Tosquelles's (which primarily concerned intra-European forms of occupation and conflict), Fanon insists in *Wretched* that 'the novel physiognomy of some of the case histories mentioned here provides confirmation, if we still needed it, that this colonial war is a new phenomenon even in the pathology it produces' (WE 184/242).³⁴

To further underscore this novelty, Fanon then presents his case histories mostly in redaction of any therapeutic discussion. Thus, for instance, when Fanon portrays the case of the two Algerian boys who murdered their European playmate, we are spared any theoretical discussion, and 'indeed, any editorializing comment at all'.³⁵ Instead, Fanon presents only a brief account, defined by 'narrative restraint', of the facts leading up to the event followed by 'relevant extracts' from his long conversations with the boys (WE 199/269).³⁶ Similarly, in Case 2 of Series B, which selectively narrates the 'paranoid delusions

and suicidal behaviour disguised as “terrorist act” in a young twenty-two-year-old Algerian’, Fanon attempts only to ‘reconstruct the young man’s dramatic story’ (202/262), whilst refusing to ‘provide [any] closure’ to it.³⁷ Having extensively spoken elsewhere in *Wretched* of the necessity of decolonial violence, in recounting the series of events that led this patient to cross several colonial checkpoints and arrive at the French staff headquarters to loudly proclaim ‘I am an Algerian’, Fanon offers no psychiatric interpretation or reasoning as to why this particular course of action might have been chosen by his patient. Indeed, even those cases that speak to the heinous colonial activities undertaken by Fanon’s European patients, such as the case detailing the depression induced in a police officer following his encounter with one of his torture victims, appear entirely redacted of judgement – be it moral, political, therapeutic, theoretical, or clinical. In place of such judgement, Fanon resorts to offering only narratively restrained accounts of events and extensive quotations of his patients’ voices.

This redactive strategy is likewise repeated in those rare case histories that deploy some therapeutic terminology as passing points of reference. A case in point is Case 3 of Series A, which portrays the major depressive disorder caused in ‘D—, former student, ALN fighter, 19 years old’, following his murder of a woman during a brief period of psychosis (WE 192/250). Besides its distinctive addition of the thematics of blood and vampirism, this case history is notable for its passing mention of Freud’s ‘Mourning and Melancholia’. This reference – which perhaps forces itself on Fanon by virtue of his initial assumption that the woman murdered by D was the latter’s mother – arrives in the form of an open question as to whether this patient can be said to exhibit the unconscious guilt complex that Freud describes in his text. Again, however, Fanon quickly refuses such discussion and continues to offer only extensive quotes from the patient that seek to articulate no definitive answer to that symptomatic conundrum.³⁸ As if to further stress this refusal, Fanon then closes his portrayal of D’s case by stating: ‘As unscientific as it may seem, we believe only time may heal the dislocated personality of this young man’ (194/253).

Faced with such explicit and avowed refusal of theoretical, clinical, or therapeutic discussion, the following question imposes itself: What might Fanon have been seeking to achieve by presenting his case histories in this redacted form? Said differently, what strategic work is redaction made to perform in the cases of *Wretched*? One response to this question has been offered by Emma Kuby. Taking *Wretched*’s case studies as a central focus, Kuby reads their inclusion as being fundamentally tied to the theory of decolonial violence expounded by Fanon in earlier parts of the book:

I see the chapter as betraying an ambivalence ... about the theory of violence espoused in preceding sections. Fanon as much as stated this at the beginning of the chapter: ‘One will perhaps find these notes on psychiatry inopportune and strangely misplaced in a book like this one. We can do absolutely nothing about this.’ In this case, the ill-timed and out-of-place—the temporally and spatially dislocating—was set the task of interrupting the smooth flow of Fanon’s prophetic logic of redemptive violence and fundamentally contradicting it In detailing cases such as these, Fanon provided his readers with extraordinarily rich material that might be used to criticize or deconstruct his own claims on the preceding pages.³⁹

On this reading, then, the central strategic function of the case histories in *Wretched* is that of *opposing* Fanon's own claims that, at the individual level, decolonial violence 'dis-intoxicates [*désintoxique*]' and 'rehabilitates [*réhabilite*]' the colonized in their own eyes (WE 51/90; translation modified).

It cannot be denied that, insofar as they portray the stories of patients whose involvement in the Algerian war of liberation left them with often indelible psychological wounds, Fanon's case histories complicate *Wretched's* more prophetic pages on violence. Yet, to say that they *complicate* this notion of violence is not quite to say that they simply *oppose* and *contradict* it. For as David Marriott argues, alongside raising the notion that revolutionary violence could lead to irrevocable forms of mental disorder, the case histories may also suggest that 'there is something of the untimeliness of these disorders, and thus of the situation and timing of their cure, that makes us see how these disorders remain pivotal to colonialism as such'.⁴⁰ That being so, the case histories could equally be read as signifying that Fanon's patients remain unwell because their revolutionary activity did not do enough to 'liquidate all the untruths that were planted in their body by the occupation' (WE 233/297; translation revised). Now, the problem with Kuby's reading of Fanon is not that it fails to note *this* possible interpretation, but that it too readily and exclusively settles the untimely and misplaced meaning of the case histories in terms of an oppositional and contradictory logic. Indeed, despite rightly pointing to the 'silence' and 'fragmentation' of the case histories, Kuby does not sufficiently reflect on what *other* interpretative possibilities Fanon may have been seeking to suggest by redactively presenting his notes on psychiatry with only 'spare, clinical rhetoric'.⁴¹

A more helpful clue for grasping the aims of Fanon's redactive strategy is given by an annotation at the outset of 'Colonial War and Mental Disorders', where Fanon writes:

Because it is a systematized negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity, colonialism forces the colonized to constantly ask themselves the question: 'Who am I in reality?' (WE 182/240; translation modified)

As Fanon suggests in his essay on 'Medicine and Colonialism', however, one problem with colonial medical arrangements is the fact that they ceaselessly foreclose the possibility for the colonized to provide a *therapeutic* answer to that very question. That is so because, in an extension of colonization's systematized negation of the other, colonial medical practitioners frequently refuse to hear what those patients have to say for themselves about their afflictions, choosing instead to diagnose them on the basis of existing medical schemas that are invariably subtended by an orthography of racism: 'the doctors say: "The pain in their case is protopathic, poorly differentiated, diffuse as in an animal."' ⁴² In that sense, not only does 'the doctor always appear as a link in the colonialist network, as a spokesman [*porte-parole*] for the occupying power'.⁴³ Above all, Fanon argues, this analysis reveals the necessity for *countering* these problems by means of an *attention* and *care* to what patients have to say for themselves *outside* of the medical establishment and its established knowledges: 'one must also hear [the voices] of the patients themselves when they left the hospital'.⁴⁴

My suggestion is that *Wretched's* case histories seek to create an interruptive locus where this attentive listening to the wounds triggered by colonialism can begin to take place. To be sure, the 'answers' provided by Fanon's patients to the existential questions forced on them by colonialism do not always neatly map onto his rehabilitative conception of violence. But, *pace* Kuby, neither do they univocally contradict it. Take the case of the two Algerian boys who murder their European friend. Kuby reads this case study as presenting 'the boys as profoundly traumatized and as compulsively "acting out" [or repeating] the atrocities executed all around them by adults'.⁴⁵ Now, had Fanon exclusively intended to note a compulsive cycle of repetition with this case, we might also have expected him to resort to the framework of psychoanalysis, for, as he writes elsewhere, this focus on 'a repetition or a copy of conflicts' is one of psychoanalysis's signal contributions to the study of neuroses (BSWM 120/115). But the reference to psychoanalysis is again redacted, or refused, here. Furthermore, what is anagrammatically opened by that redaction is a plurality of *other* interpretations of the boys' story. Perhaps what Fanon finds, or wants his readers to find, telling (*parlant*) about this story is not just its seeming repetition of colonial violence, but also the boys' seemingly accurate diagnostic of the colonial situation ("why are there only Algerians in prison?"), or the tension that emerges between this diagnostic and the boys' inadequate strategic measure of what was required of them to resolve it ("But they kill children too"). The key point is that Fanon's redactive retelling of this case history forecloses *none* of these interpretative possibilities. In fact, the redaction invites and encourages them by producing a signifying surplus that offers what we might call an *interpretative multivalence* to the imagination.

In this way, the case histories of *Wretched* can be read as deploying a Black redactive strategy. That is to say that what Fanon offers his readers by means of his refusal of psychiatric discussion is a way of attending to his patients' voices *in excess of the orthographical discourses by which their voices and lives would typically be made to disappear*. As with Sharpe's own Black redactions, what Fanon's redactive strategy forces his readers to imagine and 'reckon with [are] precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance'.⁴⁶ Taken in such terms, Fanon's silence and fragmentation should not be read as univocally contradicting his own prophetic conception of decolonial violence.⁴⁷ More accurately, Fanon's redactive portrayal of his patients' histories must be read as seeking to open an imaginative interruption that is untimely and misplaced in the precise sense that it invites us to encounter those case histories *laterally* or *otherwise than through* the binary Manichean frameworks that are upheld by colonialism's therapeutic, scientific, and psychiatric spokesmen (*porte-paroles*). Undoubtedly, as noted, there are moments when Fanon's redaction cannot avoid minimally replicating that orthographical violence, such as when, in the two boys' case, his *own* voice as a doctor (i.e., as an extension of the 'medical and legal examination[s]' that will have asked them, as Fanon does, 'Why did [they] do it?') intervenes to redirect their singular narration of their stories (WE 199-200/259-60). Yet, through Fanon's redactive performance and its refusal to provide closure to such questions, even this minimal replication of violence finds itself *transversed* by anagrammatical incides of 'non-sense' and 'opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law'.⁴⁸ As such, what is produced by Fanon's redaction of psychiatric discourse is the possibility for 'a kind of

blackened knowledge' of mental disorders, that is, 'an unscientific method' for imagining those disorders not with force, but with a care that radically refuses the disciplines and orthographies that have historically produced the unlivability of racialized and colonized lives (ITW 13).

III Refusing pathology

If, in their Black redactive form, *Wretched's* case histories cannot be taken to univocally oppose Fanon's rehabilitative conception of decolonial violence, a comparable point remains to be made regarding their presumed 'valuation' of pathology. As indicated above, the question of whether Fanon's clinically inflected writings still subscribe to a pathological model is one that has been posed by his Afro-pessimist and Black optimist readers alike, particularly by Fred Moten and Jared Sexton. Now, as Marriott notes, although in addressing the question of pathology both 'Moten and Sexton are ostensibly writing about Fanon, the matter of their dispute is informed by another debate that both constantly refer to, which turns on what it means to read blackness optimistically or pessimistically, and the onto-political consequences that follow'.⁴⁹ Their splintering notwithstanding, it is notable that both Moten and Sexton arrive at their divergent positions on blackness by means of a reading of Fanon that takes him as ascribing *some* value to the notion of pathology. Whereas Moten emphasizes 'Fanon's pathological insistence on the pathological', Sexton claims that Fanon 'fully accepts the definition of himself as pathological'.⁵⁰ That is, on Fanon's presumed embrace of pathology, Moten and Sexton 'coincide'.⁵¹

As perhaps one of Fanon's 'last' statements on the pathological, the case histories in *Wretched* are certainly not without significance for these two readings of Fanon. All the more so because it is to the psychiatric material of *Wretched* that Moten turns in 'The Case of Blackness' to develop his claim regarding Fanon's pathological insistence on the pathological. Relatedly, it is likely this Moten engagement with *Wretched* that leads Sexton to reply in 'The Social Life of Social Death' that what he finds most intriguing in 'The Case of Blackness' 'is the way that it works away from a discourse of black pathology only to swerve right back into it as an ascription to those found to be taking up and holding themselves in "the stance of the pathologist."'⁵² Despite more or less directly appealing to Fanon's case histories, however, neither Sexton nor Moten specifically address their redacted form. What complications, then, might a Black redactive reading of the case histories throw on the notion that Fanon's writings remain marked by an avowal of pathology?

Given its direct reference to *Wretched's* psychiatric material, 'The Case of Blackness' provides a useful starting point for answering this question. Now, Moten's central focus in this text turns on whether Fanon's thought is sufficiently attuned to the fugitive movement of blackness, or Black social life: 'Is blackness given a hearing—or, more precisely, does blackness give itself to a hearing—in [Fanon's] phenomenological description...of it?'⁵³ According to Moten, while this question can be asked of Fanon's work as a whole, it assumes a particular acuity in 'the attention he pays in his late work to mental disorders and/as anticolonial refusal'.⁵⁴ That is so because while the case studies in *Wretched* are

guided by the conception that ‘disorder has a set of double edges’, in that disorder can signify ‘both symptom and cure—a symptom of oppression and a staging area for political criminality [*qua* fugitivity]’, Fanon nonetheless forecloses the radical or fugitive potential of such a conception by repeatedly prioritizing a pathological or criminalizing notion of disorder. Quoting Series D in *Wretched*’s final chapter, alongside passages from the stand-alone section on North African criminality that follows it, Moten argues that Fanon remains ‘embedded in a discourse that holds the pathological in close proximity to the criminal’.⁵⁵ For instance, while Fanon might have read the systemic muscular contractions described in Group G of Series D as ‘a disruptive choreography that opens onto the meaning of things’, he instead chooses to interpret them as ‘psychosomatic pathologies’ with the help of ‘a legacy of Soviet research’ (WE 216n35/279n1).⁵⁶ Similarly, while the final chapter’s closing discussion of colonial psychiatry offers the opportunity for a more fugitive reading of the colonized’s muscular contractions as ‘a mobilization against colonial stasis’, because Fanon continues to insist that ‘crime marks the Algerian condition’, he stays trapped ‘within an almost general refusal to look at the way the colonized look at themselves, a denial or pathologization or policing of the very [fugitive] sociality that such looking implies’.⁵⁷ Through such moves, that is, Fanon remains incapable of giving the fugitivity of blackness a hearing; he refuses it.

None of which is to say that blackness does not give *itself* to a hearing in Fanon’s work. Indeed, on Moten’s reading, if Fanon’s criminalizing and pathologizing gestures work to refuse the fugitivity of blackness, then something of blackness can still be traced in his writings. The key point, however, is that, in Fanon, blackness only gives itself to this hearing in or as the *shadow* of Fanon’s own criminalizing and pathologizing gestures – that is, as the fugitive refusal of Fanon’s own denial of the fugitivity of Black social life. As Moten puts it:

In Fanon, blackness is a transversality between things, escaping (by way of) distant, spooky actions; it is translational effect and affect, transmission between cases, and could be understood...as diasporic practice. This is what he carries with him, as the imagining thing that he cannot quite imagine and cannot quite control, in his pathologizing description of it that it—that he—defies. A fugitive cant moves through Fanon, erupting out of regulatory disavowal....That is to say that there is a counterpoint in Fanon, fugitive to Fanon’s own self-regulative powers, that refuses his refusal to imagine...⁵⁸

That is, if there is something of an imaginative Black refusal in Fanon’s clinically inflected work, that refusal emerges as the fugitive underside of Fanon’s embeddedness in pathologizing and criminalizing discourses, rather than as a function of any ‘black operation that Fanon performs on his own text [that] gives the lie to his own formulations’.⁵⁹

Although the sophistication of Moten’s argument is irrefutable, it is crucial that in making these claims he cites only the last of *Wretched*’s four series of cases (Series D) and not the individual cases histories in Series A and B which, as I have argued, appear almost entirely redacted of any substantive psychiatric discussion. In so doing, Moten not only fails to note the qualitative difference between these series of cases – that is, between those

series that simply aggregate groups of cases (C and D), and those that are devoted to 'respecting the case in its singularity' (A and B).⁶⁰ More significantly, Moten also neglects the extent to which, *in their redacted form*, the individual case histories precisely work to *disembody* or *dislocate* Fanon's text from the pathologizing denial or policing of fugitive sociality that traditional psychiatric discourses imply. Certainly, as mentioned, Fanon's redactive performance cannot entirely transcend this pathologizing economy, as is demonstrated by those moments where his case histories still speak in passing of 'pathological processes' and 'pathological knots' (WE 184/242, 191/250, 207/268).⁶¹ It is such moments, moreover, that Moten 'latches' onto as the determinant force driving Fanon's attention to mental disorders. However, in this, what Moten overlooks is that these are 'only' the *holds* that the 'pathology of the entire atmosphere in Algeria' continues to impose on Fanon's more general *refusal* of it (WE 216/279). Indeed, when Fanon redactively recounts the dramatic story of the young Algerian who crosses several colonial checkpoints only to be arrested by the French, he decidedly refuses to expound – let alone allow this case be wholly determined by – whatever pathologizing 'diagnoses' were made about this patient by the 'judiciary authorities following his medical and legal examination by French psychiatrists practicing in Algeria' (WE 201/261). Instead, what Fanon transversally offers us through that redactive gesture is a case whose anagrammatical complexity and singularity cannot be reduced to the frames of pathology or those of criminality. Otherwise said, what this case history offers the imagination is a signifying surplus whose fugitive significance cuts across the boundaries of those hegemonic orthographical frames.

In a certain sense, therefore, Moten is correct to insist that a fugitive cant moves through Fanon. But what must be recognized, *pace* Moten, is that this fugitive cant does not (only) make itself felt in or as the shadow of Fanon's engagements with traditional psychiatric discourse, but rather (or also) *through the Black redactive operation that Fanon performs on his own text in refusal of those discourses*. Indeed, if refusal is an imaginative fugitivity that transversally cuts between things, then something of this fugitivity certainly makes itself felt in Fanon's refusal to recount his patients' singular histories with the help of the criminalizing and pathologizing terms of hegemonic psychiatric discourses. Furthermore, what is given the lie in this Black redactive operation is not only the canon of psychiatric thought, but also, and more pointedly, those very instances (held by Moten as determinant) where Fanon *seemingly* relies on that canon to make sense of his patients' singular histories. Thus, far from revealing a pathological insistence on the pathological, Fanon's case histories in fact betray his intent to *transvalue* pathology's frame; they betray his desire to imagine mental disorders otherwise, even in those cases where that refusal is held back by a totalizing atmosphere that necessitates the minimal replication of an orthography of pathology in and as passing points of terminological reference. Yet, it is precisely this imaginative refusal that is not given a hearing in Moten's own refusal to attend to the Black redactive operation that is at play in Fanon's text.

Turning now to Sexton, we can detect a comparable, if inverse, ascription of pathology to Fanon's writings. Now, as its title suggests, Sexton's 'The Social Life of Social Death' foregrounds the relation between Black social life and Black social death as that relation

has been posited in Black studies in the wake of Afro-pessimism, which is taken as ‘a disposition that posits a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way’.⁶² According to Sexton, while the critical implications of Afro-pessimism have not gone unheard in Black studies, they have tended to be ‘misconstrued’ by Black optimists ‘as a negation of the agency of black performance, or even as a denial of black social life’.⁶³ Sexton’s reply to this misconstrual requalifies Afro-pessimism’s theoretical and political take on Black social life: ‘Nothing in afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage.... Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space’.⁶⁴ In brief, the central critical contribution of Afro-pessimism is not, *pace* Moten, its denial of Black social life, but its recognition that such life is always ‘lived in social death’.⁶⁵

Once more, Fanon’s writings take on a pivotal role in exemplifying this Afro-pessimist take on Black social life. Against Moten’s general claim that ‘Fanon and his interlocutors... seem to have a problem embracing black social life’, Sexton insists that there is indeed an affirmation of blackness in Fanon.⁶⁶ What must be recognized, however, is that this affirmation takes shape as an affirmation of *pathological being*. Sexton writes:

‘In our antiblack world, blacks *are* pathology’....And yet, this is precisely what Gordon argues is the value and insight of Fanon: he fully accepts the definition of himself as pathological as it is imposed by a world that knows *itself* through that imposition....Though it may appear counterintuitive, or rather because it is counterintuitive, this acceptance or affirmation is active; it is a willing, or willingness, in other words, to pay whatever costs accrue to being black, to inhabiting blackness, to living a black social life under the shadow of social death. This is not an accommodation to the dictates of the antiblack world. The affirmation of blackness, which is to say an affirmation of pathological being, is a refusal to distance oneself from blackness in a valorization of minor differences that bring one closer to health, to life, or to sociality. Fanon writes in the first chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, ‘The Black Man and Language’: ‘A Senegalese who learns Creole to pass for Antillean is a case of alienation. The Antilleans who make a mockery of him are lacking in judgement’....In this we might create a transvaluation of pathology itself, something like an embrace of pathology without pathos.⁶⁷

Sexton’s view is thus that Fanon’s work precisely exemplifies how Black social life is always already negotiated in a world structured by the dictates of anti-blackness. Furthermore, if there is an Afro-pessimist politics that consists of living beyond the world that the world lives in, through Fanon, we glimpse that it is by *affirming* pathology to its extreme that this politics might begin to transvaluate not only the pathology (of blackness) that is imposed by the world of the Human, but that world itself.

In signaling a potential Fanonian transvaluation of pathology, Sexton’s response to Moten is not without value. Nevertheless, as in ‘The Case of Blackness’, this reply remains marked by what it does *not* say of Fanon’s psychiatric practice in North Africa, of his strategy for recounting the ‘novel physiognomy of some of the case histories’ included in *Wretched*, and

of what all this might say of his stance on the pathological (WE 184/242). As seen above, Sexton's engagement with Fanon proceeds through a citation of Gordon's commentary on W. E. B. Du Bois (which does not take Fanon's late psychiatric work as a focus), and by a brief appeal to the first chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*. What goes unexamined in the process is how the novel symptoms exhibited by those affected by colonial war in Algeria not only forced 'Fanon to revise the usual methodologies', but more vitally, may also have forced him to revise the affirmative stance on pathology that still subtends *Black Skin, White Masks* – where Fanon's willingness to 'affirm [himself] as a BLACK MAN [*m'affirmer en tant que NOIR*]' is indeed strategically (if momentarily) deployed to excavate the 'existential deviation' that white civilization has 'imposed' on Black people (BSWM 95/93, xviii/11; translation revised).⁶⁸

In a 1954 letter to Maurice Despinoy, Fanon reflects on his first months practicing in Algeria by writing that 'the problem of North African mental pathology appears more and more as a kernel [*noyau*] that, I would not say has been badly explored, but is still unexplored'.⁶⁹ Now, in fairness to Sexton, it is certainly possible to read such claims as an affirmation of pathology, that is, as an acceptance that 'in Algeria there functions a pathology of atmosphere' that remains to be investigated in the effects it produces even in those patients, such as those in *Wretched's* Case 5, Series B, whose 'situation [as] cured maintains and nurtures these pathological knots' (WE 216/279, 207/268; translations modified). Once again, however, to read such claims as a total *affirmation* of pathological being would be to overlook that these are 'only' the holds that a pervasive pathological atmosphere imposes on Fanon's more generalized *refusal* of it. For, indeed, while Fanon accepts that the 'atmospheric death of colonialism' pervasively and pathologically structures the lives of the colonized so as to 'make of life something resembling an incomplete death', he also argues that those lives never cease to express a facet of 'refusal or rejection' that *evades* and runs *counter to* that pathological structuration.⁷⁰ What is more, it is precisely this facet of refusal that Fanon's case histories seek to evoke by redacting an orthography that would simply render his patients' disorders legible as pathological, as is perhaps best exemplified in the two boys' case, whose portrayed refusal to straightforwardly accept or deny the wrongfulness of their actions also registers an "attitude of flight....[or] "vanishing" on the part of the patient' vis-à-vis the criminalizing and pathologizing powers in which they are held.⁷¹

With this in mind, the problem with Sexton's reading of Fanon is not (exactly) that it fails to track differences between Fanon's 'late' and 'early' conceptions of pathology. More vitally omitted from this reading, and not without consequence, is how Fanon's clinical practice in North Africa in fact led him to arrive at a new concept of pathology.⁷² Additionally, it is precisely this new concept of pathology – which transvaluates the hegemonic orthography of pathology – that is concretized in the redacted form of *Wretched's* case histories. Indeed, what is performatively signaled by Fanon's refusal of psychiatric language in these case histories (and even *across* those instances where he cannot avoid minimally replicating that language) is the suggestion that his patients' disorders were 'distinct, traceable, and yet somehow profoundly unreadable'; that they were singular disorders, attributable to a pathological atmosphere, whose fugitive singularity no pathological grammar or orthography could ever hope to approach or index.⁷³

Thus, while Sexton is ultimately right to argue that there is an implicit transvaluation of pathology in Fanon's writings, which consists of their refusal to distance themselves from blackness, it must be acknowledged that this transvaluation, as it relates to Fanon's psychiatric practice in North Africa, does not proceed through an affirmation of pathology, but rather through its *refusal*, through pathology's Black redaction.

Finally, if these reflections release a wisp of what goes unheard in both the Afro-pessimist and Black optimist readings of Fanon, they by no means enable us to settle the wider debate to which those readings refer. What ultimately cannot be decided, or remains undecidable, by an appeal to Fanon's case histories is the question of whether the meaning of blackness is to be read optimistically or pessimistically. By contrast, what my foregrounding of *Wretched's* Black redaction can account for is why Fanon's clinically inflected writings should hold such exemplifying power for *both* the Black optimist and Afro-pessimist imaginations. In a word, it is because those writings perform an untimely and disorderly Black redaction of scientific, psychiatric, and pathological discourses – because they rupture the pathological orthography of anti-blackness even as they minimally replicate its violence – that they will have been appropriated as illustrative by both Black optimists and Afro-pessimists in their efforts to think blackness beyond the world that the world lives in. Which is to say that the power of Fanon's thought lies not in what it can illustrate about *either* the optimistic *or* pessimistic readings of blackness, but in the imaginative potential that its Black refusals open for continuing to think social life and social death *between* those perspectives. Indeed, as Fanon evocatively declares in the final chapter of *Wretched*: 'The imagination is required to comprehend these things' (WE 231/295; translation modified).

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Notes

1. While commentaries on Fanon's thought do regularly mention the case histories in *Wretched*, they primarily do so in passing. Two notable exceptions to this tendency are: Kuby 2015; Kawash 1999. Yet, as I argue in what follows, even such readings are insufficiently attentive to the imaginative dimension that offers itself in the redacted presentation of Fanon's case histories.
2. Fanon 2004, 181 (translation modified); Fanon 2002, 239. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *WE* with pagination from Philcox's 2004 English translation followed by pagination from the 2002 French edition.

3. [Kuby 2015](#), 68.
4. [Sharpe 2016](#), 124. Hereafter cited parenthetically as ITW.
5. [Fanon 1965](#), 128; translation modified.
6. [Moten 2008](#), 177–218; [Sexton 2011](#), 1–47.
7. In this regard, compare [Fanon's \(2008, 95; trans. modified\)](#) provisional assertion in *Black Skin, White Masks* that he will 'affirm [himself] as a BLACK MAN', to the later claims in *A Dying Colonialism* on the 'refusal' and 'attitude of flight' that is 'not a systematic opposition, but a "vanishing" on the part of the [North African] patient' in relation to the pathological mechanisms of Western medicine (1965, 129). *Black Skin, White Masks* will hereafter be cited parenthetically as BSWM with pagination from Philcox's 2008 English translation followed by the pagination from the 1952 French edition.
8. My conception of refusal is inspired by [Sharpe's \(2023\)](#) dialogue with Saidiya Hartman in *Ordinary Notes*: 'Refusal is the shorthand for what can't be named within the conceptual field of the enclosure. It expresses our unwillingness to be conscripted to man's project or world. It is easier to index than to describe' (254).
9. [Hartman 2007](#), 6.
10. While Black redaction is introduced by Sharpe as 'coextensive' with Black annotation, I here redact a focus on the latter so as to further underscore the redactive character of Fanon's case histories in *Wretched*. For more on Sharpe's notion of Black annotation, see: ITW 113–120.
11. Though Sharpe does not explicitly make this point, her use of the term 'blackened', in both *In the Wake* and elsewhere, indicates that Black redaction can function as a strategy for re-imagining the lives not only of Black people, but also of 'those people (of recognizable African descent and not) who because of a proximity to blackness (specifically, a proximity to the shame, violence, etc. that black bodies are made to wear) are covered by the shadow of blackness' ([Sharpe 2010](#), 190–91, n9).
12. [Sharpe 2010](#), 12.
13. For an account of the daguerreotypes' visual language of race and property in their relation to nineteenth-century racial science, see [Lewis 2020](#).
14. [Sharpe 2018](#), 177.
15. [Sharpe 2018](#), 174; cf. ITW 123.
16. See [Dash's \(1992\)](#) interview with bell hooks for an account of how this redactive decision to portray the traces of slavery as an indigo blue stain was not primarily reconfigurative of existing archival sources and knowledge, but creative or imaginative (31).
17. As Rhea [Storr \(2021\)](#) argues with reference to the cinematic practice of Black filmmakers, Black redaction can be deployed in the 'production' of images and thus perform 'an intervention before the image is seen or read'.
18. [Hartman 2008](#), 13–14.
19. [Sharpe 2010](#), 11.
20. [Hartman 2008](#), 13.
21. I draw this distinction between opposition and refusal from Tina [Campt \(2017\)](#), who argues that 'refusal... is not a simple act of opposition or resistance' (109). I here also note [Fanon's \(1965\)](#) claim in 'Medicine and Colonialism' that the 'conducts of refusal' performed by his patients are 'not a systematic opposition, but a "vanishing"' in relation to the 'scientific' impulses of the Western medical apparatus (128–9; translation modified).

22. [Campt 2017](#), 32; cf. [Sharpe 2010](#), 87–8.
23. [Sharpe 2018](#), 171.
24. For two excellent studies of Fanon’s decolonial psychiatric practice in Algeria, see: [Khalifa 2018](#); [Vergès 1996](#).
25. [Fanon and Azoulay 2018](#), 363.
26. The last two ‘cases’ in Series B also group several individual cases in an attempt to clarify their shared ‘symptoms’ and ‘underlying problem[s]’ (WE 206–7/266–8).
27. See, for instance: [Fanon and Lévy 2018](#).
28. While Sharpe’s notion of weather may appear more focused than *Wretched*’s atmospherics on the specifically anti-Black environments that have been produced in the wake of transatlantic slavery, it is worth recalling that the themes of atmosphere, respiration, and suffocation also feature in Fanon’s own analysis of anti-blackness (cf. BSWM 5/16, 12/22, 201/183), and that Sharpe herself suggests that these are ‘calamities and catastrophes that sometimes answer to the names of occupation, colonialism, [and] imperialism’ (ITW 113). This suggests that while Sharpe’s weather and *Wretched*’s pitiless atmosphere each retain a distinctive specificity, they perhaps also form part of the same totalizing ensemble of racialized violence that was inaugurated by the slave trade.
29. The theme of atmospherics arises again in Fanon’s one-line introduction to Series B: ‘Here we have collected cases or groups of cases where the triggering factor is first and foremost the atmosphere of outright war that reigns in Algeria’ (WE 199/259).
30. Porot and Sutter, cited in WE 226/290.
31. Fanon clearly separates this section of the chapter from the case studies when he writes that in methodological contrast to the former, the latter will undertake a more ‘scientific’ approach: ‘We propose here to expound this official theory, to recall its basis and scientific reasoning. In a second stage we shall review the facts and endeavor to interpret them’ (WE 221/285–6).
32. For valuable studies of Fanon’s radical refiguration of the methods of Institutional Psychotherapy in the context of Algeria, consult: [Robcis 2020](#); [Faramelli 2020](#).
33. [Robcis 2016](#), 212. More broadly, Fanon’s approach to madness is also in agreement with [Tosquelle’s \(2014\)](#) view that ‘madness never began with a generative trouble; it is a historical and dialectical phenomenon’ (216).
34. That by 1961 Fanon should have chosen not to present his case histories in dialogue with the ‘canon’ of institutional psychotherapy can also be attributed to his increased distancing from that movement’s therapeutic methodology. Already, in a 1954 article co-authored with Jacques Azoulay, Fanon had argued that this ‘western-inspired social therapy’ approach could be applied successfully in the context of North Africa only when ‘a leap’ or ‘transmutation of values’ was performed ([Fanon and Azoulay 2018](#), 362–3). By 1959, Fanon’s criticisms of this approach become even more pronounced: ‘with institutional-therapy, we create fixed institutions, strict and rigid settings, and schemas that are rapidly stereotyped. In the neo-society [created by social-therapeutic methods], there are no inventions; there is no creative innovative dynamic. There is no veritable shake-up, no crises’ ([Fanon and Geronimi 2018](#), 499).
35. [Kuby 2015](#), 67.
36. [Hartman 2008](#), 12; [Sharpe 2018](#), 177.
37. [Hartman 2008](#), 12.

38. As [Kawash \(1999\)](#) notes, ‘the signal importance of blood in the crossing discourses of race and sexuality indicates a somewhat overwhelming complexity of possible interpretations’ of this Fanonian case history (250).
39. [Kuby 2015](#), 66–8.
40. [Marriott 2018](#), 178.
41. [Kuby 2015](#), 68.
42. [Fanon 1965](#), 127.
43. [Fanon 1965](#), 131.
44. [Fanon 1965](#), 127.
45. [Kuby 2015](#), 67.
46. [Hartman 2008](#), 12; [Sharpe 2018](#), 177.
47. Taking as her focus *Wretched’s* case histories, [Kawash \(1999\)](#) similarly argues that there is a ‘multivocality of violence in Fanon’s text’ and that, as such, he is neither justifying nor lamenting decolonial violence, but rather ‘indicating the complexity of the relation between reality and violence’ (256). However, Kawash specifically ties this multivocality to the quasi-spectral figure of the vampire that figures in only *one* of Fanon’s case histories, and thus neglects the extent to which an imaginative multivocality or multivalence (that exceeds the binary distinction of ‘for’ or ‘against’ violence) is also produced *through* the other case histories by virtue of their redactive refusal of existing psychiatric discourses.
48. [Hartman 2008](#), 12.
49. [Marriott 2018](#), 200.
50. [Moten 2008](#), 208; [Sexton 2011](#), 27.
51. [Marriott 2018](#), 200.
52. [Sexton 2011](#), 23–4.
53. [Moten 2008](#), 185.
54. [Moten 2008](#), 205.
55. [Moten 2008](#), 209.
56. [Moten 2008](#), 208.
57. [Moten 2008](#), 213.
58. [Moten 2008](#), 211–12.
59. [Moten 2008](#), 210.
60. [Marriott 2018](#), 225.
61. In speaking of these pathological ‘processes’ and ‘knots’, Fanon is of course not ascribing pathologies *to* individual patients, but appealing to the more *impersonal* ‘pathology of the entire atmosphere in Algeria’ (WE 216/279).
62. [Sexton 2011](#), 23.
63. [Sexton 2011](#), 23.
64. [Sexton 2011](#), 28.
65. [Sexton 2011](#), 29.
66. [Sexton 2011](#), 25.
67. [Sexton 2011](#), 26–28. The opening quote is from [Gordon 2000](#), 88.
68. [Marriott 2018](#), 178.
69. [Fanon 2018](#), 350.

70. Fanon 1965, 128. As Achille Mbembe (2019) notes: ‘Fanon’s patient is reconized...in his capacity of refusal’ (140).
71. Fanon 1965, 129. Here, I recall Campt’s (2017) definition of refusal as ‘a fundamental renunciation of the terms imposed upon black subjects that reduce black life to always already suspect by refusing to accept or deny these terms as their truth’ (109–13).
72. Marriott 2018, 191.
73. Marriott 2018 xvi.

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